Democratic Defence: Identity, Resilience and the New Frontlines of European (In)security

Strengthening the social democratic dimensions of collective security in an era of strategic competition

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About Protection Approaches

Protection Approaches is a national charity working to prevent and protect people from identity-based violence. Through a combination of community-led initiatives, cutting-edge research, technical advice, and policy advocacy, our work focusses on identifying and redressing the root causes of prejudice, division, and discrimination in society. We support and facilitate community-led solutions to these challenges. For a decade, our work has contributed to building social cohesion and societal resilience, rooted in an understanding that building strong, resilient, and inclusive societies requires collective action.

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Cover photo: A statue of Athena, the Greek goddess of wisdom, justice, and civic protection, standing outside the Austrian Parliament Building in Vienna.

World peace cannot be safeguarded without the making of creative efforts proportionate to the dangers which threaten it.

The contribution which an organised and living Europe can bring to civilisation is indispensable to the maintenance of peaceful relations.

Robert Schuman
The Declaration of 9 May 1950

The blunt truth is that in the coming decades geopolitics will test the strength of our communities like never before. Not least because hostile states will actively seek to divide us as part of their hybrid strategies. Social cohesion is therefore not just a good in and of itself. It is also a vital front in the resilience of our national security. To put it simply: if we are to be strong on the global stage, we must have strong and united communities at home. And so, to weather the storms of this volatile world, it follows that our 'social contract' must now also be strengthened.

Protecting What Matters: Towards a more confident, cohesive, and resilient United Kingdom
Published 9 March 2026

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Author's Note

This discussion paper draws on a programme of engagement undertaken by Protection Approaches over the past year to better understand how evolving threats to democratic societies are reshaping the European security landscape. Europe, here, refers to the wider European security space, spanning the United Kingdom, EU member states and neighbouring democratic partners whose stability and security remain deeply interconnected. This includes the strategic frontiers of the High North, the Nordics and Baltics, and the Western Balkans, where the pressures of contemporary geopolitical competition are increasingly visible.

While this paper focuses on Europe, many of the same trends pose threat to societies around the world – the reimagining of social democratic strategy in the face of authoritarian and aggressive competition requires a collective rethink at the global level. Likewise, while this paper puts forward a call for confident democratic defence of our region's freedoms and way of life, this should not be interpreted as a view of European values, choices, and contributions as being homogenous, constant, or without deep flaws. On the contrary, democratic states inside and outside of Europe have failed to recognise that today's volatility and tomorrow's threats are in part the long-term costs of their own inconsistency over many decades.

The analysis below reflects insights gathered through extensive consultations across Europe and throughout the United Kingdom between September 2025 and March 2026. We engaged in conversations with more than 250 people from diplomatic services, security and defence communities, civil society organisations, philanthropic institutions, academic institutions and policy organisations. This included visits to Sarajevo, Berlin, Copenhagen, Nuuk, Munich and Podgorica, alongside discussions with UK embassies and diplomatic staff across the region. Two high-level roundtables convened with the UK's National Security Secretariat, the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) and King's College London, and a third with the University of Copenhagen, brought together senior policymakers, military representatives, analysts and civil society leaders to examine how identity-based threats, hybrid statecraft and democratic resilience are reshaping European security debates. The paper draws too on more than a decade of Protection Approaches' own knowledge building regarding the changing nature of identity-based violence in the UK and worldwide.

Rather than present new empirical research or primary evidence, what follows offers a synthesis of the perspectives, concerns and emerging areas of consensus encountered through this work and consultation. Its aim is to help articulate how contemporary threats—particularly the strategic weaponisation of identity and grievance—are increasingly understood across Europe as part of a broader transformation of collective insecurity.

There are inevitably gaps in what follows. For example, the emphasis on Russian, US, and far right strategy represents reflections of most who we spoke to – and are offered here as prominent illustrations of broader global trends in antidemocratic influence. That actions by or connected with the Chinese Communist Party, the Iranian regime, Prime Minister Netanyahu's government, Islamist terrorism, or other exclusionary projects were not recurringly surfaced during regional consultation does not mean those threats are not present, nor that the weaponisation of identity is not part of their arsenal. While this paper has been shaped by the thoughts, research, and warnings of many, it does not claim to represent the views of others. Any errors are the author's

own.

While more by coincidence than design, the final draft of this paper was completed in Oswiecim, Poland, during a teaching visit to Auschwitz and Birkenau concentration camps. Europe has never been immune to the weaponisation of identity as a strategic tool, to devastating and long-lasting cost, whether within its borders or imposed abroad. The Nazi targeting of Europe's Jewish populations, of Roma and Gypsy communities, of LGBTQ+ people, and those considered to have disabilities was understood by the Allied powers to be a challenge distinct to the war. Thus, in 1944, when Jewish appeals were made to the British Foreign Office and US State Department to bomb the tracks that led to Auschwitz and Birkenau, where up to 10,000 people were being murdered each day, the response was to say no – because it would divert military resource to a civilian issue and away from the war effort. What was deemed a diversion of military resourcing then and in the decade before armed conflict began was fatal failure to recognise that the defence of civilian life and Europe's social fabric is not and has never been separate from its security, but central to it.

Kate Ferguson
May 2026
Co-Executive Director, Protection Approaches

Acknowledgements

This work was made possible through the time, insight and generosity of a wide range of individuals and organisations across the UK and Europe. The project was shaped through conversations with more than 250 policymakers, diplomats, researchers, civil society leaders, community organisers, journalists and practitioners working across national security, social cohesion, human rights, conflict prevention and democratic resilience. Polling of the UK public and focus groups of organisations on the frontline of these new harms provided specific insight into how the trends discussed in this paper are perceived and felt in the UK. Narrative workshops have helped stress test the framing and resonance of talking about a different kind of defence in a period of uncertainty and growing shock. This collective knowledge has made enormous contribution to our organisational thinking and provided a depth of evidence that sits behind not only this paper but varied activities we're taking forward as part of this programme.

Special thanks go to those who partnered with Protection Approaches through parts of this programme, particularly Jessica White at RUSI and her fantastic team, and Andrew Ehrhardt and Maeve Ryan at the Centre for Statecraft and National Security at KCL. Dean Cooper-Cunningham at the University of Copenhagen offered generous insight into his new and much needed research and, as ever, provoking thought partnership. Fred Carver's advice, partnership and challenge extends far beyond this paper but contributed particularly to visits to Denmark and Greenland, and to the thinking through of Scandinavian models of resilience, cohesion, and protection. Special thanks too to those within governments who offered insight, comment, and clarification and so gave the paper and wider work additional depth and connection. Thank you to those who read drafts of this paper and offered smart suggestions, adjustments, and corrections – and who gave encouragement and support to its arguments.

We are deeply grateful to all those who shared expertise, challenged assumptions, offered constructive criticism, and contributed their experience and analysis throughout the course of this work. Many did so during a period of considerable political uncertainty, impossible diaries, and mounting institutional pressure. Their openness, seriousness and willingness to engage across sectors and disciplines fundamentally strengthened both the analysis and recommendations presented here. We think a lot about the ethics of drawing on the time and energies of those who are already leveraging their efforts to push against oppression, division, and violence – we hope that what is presented here does some justice to the generosity, sincerity, and often anxiety of those who gave their time to input in these circumstances.

Executive summary

This discussion paper addresses the changing ways in which identity is weaponised in an era of strategic competition as a means of dividing and weakening the relative cohesion that exists between European states, societies, and their communities. It warns that in the context of a communications and tech revolution, global trends of democratic backsliding, escalating resource nationalism and the hollowing out of collective problem solving, the trajectories of harm identified in this paper are set to intensify. It makes the case for urgent defence of the social democratic assets that are under attack. It suggests that such a mobilisation requires a reorientation in European collective security strategy commensurate to the true scope of threat and scale of what is at risk.

Across Europe today, four sites of challenge are most prevalent in the identity-based lines of contemporary anti-democratic contestation: the politics of family, gender and reproduction; the boundaries of belonging, citizenship and migration; the democratic realm including those individuals and institutions associated with rights, pluralism, and good governance; the epistemic foundations of truth, science, expertise, and certainty.

The sites under pressure are not random; they represent the key terrain of the domestic front in contemporary strategic competition, shaping how our societies understand themselves: who belongs, what is true, what is valued, and how power is exercised and held to account.

Observations drawn from across Europe's strategic frontiers point to a growing convergence in how our contemporary regional insecurity is now understood. While the specific harms differ by context, the underlying dynamics are increasingly shared. External aggression and internal political decline in a context of deepening geopolitical uncertainty are interacting in ways that place sustained pressure on the social and democratic fabric of European societies. This emerging reality is best understood not as a set of distinct challenges, but as a tripartite threat environment, in which Russian aggression, the resurgence of the far right, and volatility in the transatlantic relationship reinforce one another and converge on a common objective; the weakening of democratic cohesion, stability, and influence.

These new fronts of strategic competition and the harm they cause cannot be met with tanks on the lawn and drones in the skies. Traditional defence and rapid investment in hybrid security is needed but alone will be insufficient so long as anti-democratic antagonism towards Europe and its freedoms continues to take aim at the civilian and social realms, employing tactics that fall below current thresholds of armed conflict and definitions of threats to national security.

As the world changes, the way in which governments discharge responsibilities of national and regional security must change with it and if the new fronts of strategic competition increasingly lie within societies themselves, new impetus must be found to adapt accordingly. Likewise, how Europe and European states participate in the world must also reflect this reality. If the civilian and social realms are being increasingly targeted, it follows that just as military capabilities require sustained political and financial investment to keep us safe, so too do the civic, social and institutional assets of democracy. Democratic defence must take place not only

across a number of policy domains, but across the terrains of narrative and future vision; of infrastructure and capacity; and as an analytic lens to apply when assessing choices. These are the standard tools of statecraft when it comes to operationalising grand strategy, and yet it is in these fundamentals regarding the protection of what matters where leadership has so often been lacking.

In the face of varied efforts to weaken civilian and political democratic assets, it will be the societies where people and government trust each other, and where the resilience of connective social, cultural and economic tissue is strong, that are able to successfully and safely navigate this likely enduring period of poly-shock and anxiety. Europe – its states, societies, partners, institutions, and security apparatus – will need to mount a democratic defence that recognises it is precisely what makes inclusive, fair and vibrant democracies distinct from the alternatives that are the assets of immense strategic advantage, keeping us safer, freer, and more prosperous. Safeguarding European security and democracy now requires urgent commensurate mobilisation of political will, resources and institutional capability to repair, strengthen and defend what is under attack.

A changing aggressive statecraft

Authoritarian states, political extremists and transnational networks have recognised something democratic strategy still treats as peripheral: the easiest way to weaken a democracy is not through military confrontation but social fracture. Across Europe, we found growing recognition that this gearshift is of most serious concern with regard to Russian aggression, the resurgence of the region's far right, and increasing volatility in the transatlantic relationship. While often – but not always – operating distinctly, this tripartite threat nexus draws on comparable playbooks to activate grievance, undermine democratic consensus and destabilise Europe's relative hegemony, influence, standards, and values. The composite parts of Europe's social democratic fabric have therefore become contested frontlines in an increasingly volatile struggle over global influence, rules and governance.

Contemporary aggressive statecraft has long been transforming. Authoritarian strategy now increasingly seeks to weaken democratic influence not through military action but social fracture where identity, grievance and belonging have become strategic weapons to damage the social contract between citizens and state. This is particularly evident in Russian strategy, which has long cultivated a practice of propaganda and agitation to advance political and military goals, and now deploys hybrid and cognitive tactics at scale to shape European political and social environments. Similar efforts, at varied scale, can be seen in the statecraft in Hungary, Israel, Iran, the UAE, and China.

The far right has also been changing tactics, becoming simultaneously better connected, transnational, and localised as they cultivate networks of influence that successfully normalise anti-democratic and exclusionary political projects while maintaining radicalising pressure from the margins. Across Europe and North America, these movements are increasingly networked, serving as both domestic political actors and transnational ecosystems of influence, with growing links to wider geopolitical strategic competition.

Adversaries to social democratic progress have invested in strategic execution of the long haul towards a vision of the world not as it is but as they wish it to be. Meanwhile, the reactive and disjointed approach of many – not all – European states to growing domestic and international challenge to our rights, values, peace, security, and safety has been one of slippage, characterised by short-term rather than strategic trade-offs and an underestimation of the longer game being played by others. A consequence is that investment in inclusive democratic defence and societal resilience has remained marginal to European security. As adversaries have built capacity, coordination, and strategic clarity, many states in Europe have hollowed out their own institutional capabilities to respond – and too often simply conceded the argument.

At the same time, the assumptions that have underpinned European security since 1945 – that democratic progress would continue, that American guarantees and alignment would remain stable, and that traditional deterrence would prevent major conflict – are no longer reliable. Russia's war in Ukraine, the resurgence of the far right across Europe, and increasingly chauvinist action from the United States are converging to create a new and more uncertain strategic environment for the region. Expansionist threats towards Greenland, the kidnapping of the Venezuelan premier, and the decisions to declare war with Iran signal new escalations in explicit disregard

by the current US administration for many conventions that have enabled transatlantic partnership and given confidence to the region's prevailing understanding of its collective security.

Growing anxieties regarding the back-boning by the United States of European and NATO defence have rightly provoked recognition of regional military and intelligence vulnerabilities in a future where the transatlantic relationship becomes increasingly confrontational, asymmetric and potentially untenable. However, while European rearmament may respond to some new regional realities, it cannot address the limits of contemporary conventional deterrence nor those threats that operate deliberately under the thresholds of traditional conflict and security – and take aim at the civilian and social realms.

The case of what democratic states had – and have – to lose by failing to confront either the swelling authoritarian threat, or the self-harm of social democratic inconsistency, is still not sufficiently made. Rather, the strategic assets of law, rights, and values that make democracies distinct and collectively safer have been steadily marginalised in the systems and around the tables of modern democratic governance. The result is a widening and dangerous gap between the speed and sophistication of efforts to divide and destabilise European society, and the lacklustre mobilisation being brought to bear in defence of it.

The strategic weaponisation of identity as anti-democratic contestation

Identity has always been deliberately weaponised to advance political projects, secure territory, turn financial profit, or achieve notoriety. Mobilising grievance, demonising "the other," persecution, division, and deliberate provocation are the recurring tactics of chauvinist and authoritarian movements throughout history and across the world. It is therefore unsurprising that in this moment, these forms of political and strategic contestation are resurgent, and are increasingly embedded in how expansionist and or exclusionary power is being exercised.

Across Europe today, four sites of challenge are most prevalent in the identity-based lines of contemporary anti-democratic contestation: the politics of family, gender and reproduction; the boundaries of belonging, citizenship and migration; the democratic realm including those individuals and institutions associated with rights, pluralism, and good governance; the epistemic foundations of truth, science, expertise, and certainty.

The tactics are varied but recognisable across the political, legal, informational and financial and community arenas, from the global to the very local. Disinformation and social media manipulation are used to amplify grievance and polarisation; lawfare and coordination reshape legal and institutional environments to constrain rights and dissent; and sustained political and agitating communications normalise exclusionary narratives within mainstream discourse. These efforts are often underpinned by both legal and illicit funding flows, connecting elite political, media and strategic actors with decentralised networks of supporters, enablers and profiteers. Together, these tactics enable the systematic targeting of democratic assets, from civic space and independent media to education systems and community relations, hollowing out legitimacy and resilience from within.

These harms are not felt equally across the region, nor are the responses required uniform. In security terms, many have become tactics that now operate through hybrid and cognitive domains via new digital information environments to amplify wide-ranging and specific grievances, conspiracy, and false information. Politically, this strategic activation of difference is part of a traceable shift in authoritarianism, where autocrats such as Putin, Erdogan, and Orbán have cultivated a practice that 'controls (sic) their citizens by distorting information and simulating democratic procedures' rather than through the visual violence of the twentieth century: 'Like spin doctors in democracies, they spin the news to engineer support.'[1]

The areas of contestation are themselves, of course, not new—but in an online world amid an information and technological revolution, tactics once bounded by geography have become transnational, networked and capable of operating at scale and at the hyper-local level. These contemporary efforts are effective because the tactics are not only coordinated and varied but ever more scalable, and very low cost. Much of this activity is overt, prominent in the public rhetoric and policy of political proponents, in the content of online agitators and influencers, and in ritualised acts of identity-based violence. But other tactics are more covert, concealed in the discreet partnerships, networks, and financial flows that connect movements and enable mobilisation.[2] Genuine and fabricated localised community discontent can now be instrumentalised by these transnational architectures of influence and finance, promising emancipatory exclusionary visions of an alternative worldview. This enables

deniable devolution of responsibility for consumption of and support for the narratives and movements. Where these adaptable ecosystems meet 'home-grown' grievance, sincerely held legitimate political views, or vulnerable individuals, a self-perpetuating radicalising discourse will gain momentum.

A dysregulated online environment has rapidly transformed the ability to 'mass-produce disinformation, simulate engagement through bots and online networks, and exploit moments of national grief or social instability to accelerate radicalisation and mobilisation.'[3] This rapid reconfiguration of human communication and engagement with information has turbocharged the growing impact of propaganda strategies over the past decade but it also reflects the disruptive force communications revolutions have had throughout history on social and political relations.

Changing media environments have always brought social and political flux to Europe, from the translation of the Bible to invention of the printing press, or the Russian revolution, fascism in the 1930s, and the ethnic nationalism in the western Balkans through the 1990s. Unlike the propaganda campaigns that characterised the rise and popularisation of twentieth century authoritarianism, today's exclusionary communications and narrative building strategy has diversified to meet the opportunities of new economic and media markets; whereas Nazi propaganda was centrally controlled, social media platforms and content producers gain revenue as well as reputation through their divisive material, driving a growing industry that interacts with and amplifies more explicitly political aspects of the ecosystem.[4]

It is worth remembering that the violent disintegration of Yugoslavia's complex cultural, social and political fabric was enabled by a proliferation of new media platforms producing nationalist, highly gendered, and racist content on music channels, chat shows and co-opted news stations. As socialist era censorship and ownership laws were swiftly undone, political parties bought their own TV channels and tabloids, channelling new mass communication to publics in national languages, tailored for and radicalising particular audiences. This newly unregulated media market became the mouthpiece for Yugoslavia's decimation – in the wake of the atrocities and region's collapse, the nationalist TV stations were described as 'the greatest war criminals of them all.'[5]

Identity-based contestation is far more than an inevitable feature of 'normal politics' but a deliberate and effective strategy of anti-democratic mobilisation. The sites under pressure are not random; they represent the key terrain of the domestic front in contemporary strategic competition — shaping how societies understand themselves: who belongs, what is true, what is valued, and how power is exercised and held to account.

While elements of this contestation sit within the bounds of legitimate democratic disagreement, the scale, coordination and intent evidence systematic exploitation of difference to fracture consensus, weaken institutions and erode the conditions in which pluralist democracy can function. Left unchecked, this trajectory will not only continue but will intensify, diversify and become more extreme. This raises urgent questions regarding what Europe – and all states that aspire to inclusive social

democracy – must defend and protect; it raises also the need to address where the boundaries lie between legitimate democratic contestation and its manipulation.

It is not coincidental that embedded throughout the tactics of this anti-democratic strategy is a cynical manipulation of the language of free expression as a means of chilling political challenge, and is increasingly weaponised to legitimise exclusion, harassment, and incitement rather than protect pluralism. So long as malign contestation continues to instrumentalise democratic rights, laws and values as a means of implementation, democratic defence will remain on the backfoot, cornered into battlegrounds defined by adversaries. How can European states, societies and its regional institutions defend what is under attack on its own terms?

In focus: Family, identity and social order as sites of contestation

'The salvation of Germany depends not only on the enthusiasm of our male youth for the resurgence of our fatherland, but it depends just as much on the devotion with which our women and girls turn back to the family and to the idea of motherhood!' [6]

Third Reich Minister, Wilhelm Frick,
Mothers' Day Radio Address 1934

''[a] battle for control over women and our bodies is part of the contest for power in our unstable world. This is playing out locally, nationally in the UK and internationally'

Laura Kyrke-Smith MP and Melanie Ward MP
Women's bodies are a front in the fight for the future, The House Magazine
8 March 2026

Aggressive competition to reassert patriarchal gender and sexual norms has turned the significant social democratic assets of gender equality, freedoms and protections of who and how we love, and of bodily autonomy, into sites of intense political mobilisation in Europe, with coordinated rollbacks of rights and the valorisation of rigid "traditional" family models that cast those who fall outside them as socially harmful or illegitimate.[7] In the context of strategic weaponisation of identity as a means of antidemocratic contestation, their deliberate erosion represents not just an attack on rights in and of themselves, but on the foundations of democratic social, cultural, familial and intimate life. Research carried out in the wider project concluded that 'gendered narratives act as shared political infrastructure. They are flexible enough to be adapted to different settings and are emotionally charged, which can intensify other identity-based othering dynamics that are rooted in race, ethnicity and religion'[8]

The narratives and political projects these 'threat vectors'[9] advance are usually highly racialised, quietly or explicitly reinforcing 'a racial hierarchy in which white femininity is upheld as delicate, pure and in need of protection.'[10] Contemporary 'Great Replacement' claims that European populations are being intentionally replaced by non-European —specifically non-white and non-Christian— migrants offer racist, gendered solutions to racialised anxieties of 'civilisational erasure',[11] helping to narrow further the boundaries of belonging and citizenship through essentialised anti-migration and often anti-Muslim propaganda and conspiracy advanced by mainstream far right parties and extremists. By framing Europe's challenges in terms of 'civilizational decline,' falling birthrates, migration, and the erosion of cultural

identity, the US National Security Strategy applies explicitly the same gendered, demographic, and racialised lens. It is this framing, according to its own public policy, that justifies US alignment with Europe's far right so as to 'cultivate resistance to Europe's current trajectory within European nations', including by supporting the 'growing influence of patriotic European parties.'[12]

The US is following years of similar strategy by Russia, which has 'consistently positioned itself as a space of 'traditional family values' against a morally decaying, sexually decadent Europe, known as 'Gayropa' in Russian policy' where 'Russia positions itself as a morally superior civilisation against a European bloc in need of rescuing from its path of civilisational decay.'[13] As Alex Farrow of Kaleidoscope has warned, 'LGBTI+ rights are often framed as a social issue. But today they are a frontline in the defence of European security - continental, national, and individual. Without serious support, Russian tactics face little resistance — leaving Europe even further exposed…If it fails to act, Europe risks not just losing freedoms but becoming a fractured, weaker continent.'[14]

This tripartite mobilisation on the sites of gender and family threatens profound and potentially irreversible damage —driving social and political polarisation; rising domestic and gender-based violence; growing levels of hate crimes, extremist and terrorist incidents; faster democratic backsliding; the exclusion of women and minorities from realms of professional life; and wider social fracture. A spectrum of multi-generational gendered harms and risks will deepen as toxic gender roles such as those advanced through cultural radicalisation networks like the 'manosphere', the 'tradwife' movements and their future iterations.

Coordinated effort to dismantle rights and protections for gender identity, sexual orientation and reproductive rights are among the most common early indicators that democratic freedoms more broadly are narrowing, hierarchical understandings of society are normalising, and they are a prelude to increases in domestic, communitylevel and structural violence.

The trajectory of anti-democratic contestation of this arena is clearly gathering strength and pace. Versions of proto-natalist, anti-LGBTQ+ extremist conservative resurgence are rising and gaining confidence across Europe, within far-right political parties, hard right movements and online discourse. Organised anti-gender and misogynist strategy in Europe has become dynamic, well-funded, adaptable, and is operating at scale. As within other arenas of contestation, tactics include targeting funding, social media regulation, strategic litigation and lawfare, and geopolitical re-engineering where 'anti-gender strategies operate as part of broader geopolitical projects that seek to shift states away from human rights-based multilateral frameworks.'[15] Research by the European Parliamentary Forum for Sexual and Reproductive Rights (EPF) found an unprecedented rise in funding for anti-rights and anti-gender movements across Europe, uncovering US$1.18 billion between 2019 and 2023, and mapping the ways in which 'religious extremists are making a strategic effort to enter mainstream politics by forming coalitions with anti-gender equality organisations, church-run NGOs and far-right populist parties'.[16] Russia is the biggest

contributor and the US a close second, but funds are being raised from across Europe, representing both an internal and external challenge. Even as explicit misogynist intent is set out in the national security strategies of the region's most significant adversary and historically closest ally[17] – to talk about gender and security in most European policy rooms is still seen to be unserious, soft, secondary.

Reassertion of toxic gender relations serve multiple purposes. They help to glamourise the idealised exclusionary society, promising an alternative to the real-world challenges young people across Europe face. From the perspective of aggressive anti-democratic strategy, where weakened democracies are the goal, there is no swifter nor deeper means of damaging a society than stoking grievance, fears, and extremism regarding what it means to love and how and if to build a family. And it is working. Neil Datta, Executive Director of EPF has warned that 'gender equality and sexual and reproductive health and rights is at the centre of the far-right's strategy for gaining power across Europe.'[18] Global evidence already shows that younger men in many democracies are becoming less liberal and is shaping electoral outcomes across Europe and North America.[19]

Frank acknowledgement is needed of precisely what it is harmful actors are mobilising towards in and for Europe – and the scale of harm to women, girls, LGBTQ+ people, familial and community relations, democratic and social health, economic stability, further progress towards their objectives will bring. Such is the damage of widespread extreme gendered social engineering that its impacts will be felt across and by all genders and generations, but with those considered to be less deserving of protecting always paying the sharpest and highest price. This is not an isolated arena of contestation but an illustrative snapshot of the galvanised strategic targeting of the social and civilian foundations of democratic life that is increasingly defining the frontline of contemporary European insecurity.

As these systemic threats deepen, the likelihood of rapid escalation in response to orchestrated or opportunistic triggers will only rise. In these instances, the more explicit threats to human life and public safety that breach conventional thresholds of national security risks will be most apparent to traditional security systems but newer, broader, and or deliberately chameleon harms risk falling beneath the radar. The systems must therefore adapt to the changing threat environment. For example, the UK experienced the most widespread racist riots for a century following the exploitation by hostile non-state and state actors using highly gendered, racialised and xenophobic narratives of migrant attack upon young British girls to encourage mass protest and violence. It was a textbook case of the weaponisation of conceptions of 'masculine' duty and identity-based othering to encourage mass rioting with harms to people and property, as well as significant cost. While the Southport attack that killed three girls, and the subsequent threats to life and public safety of the riots, triggered swift traditional security responses, it was clear – as the subsequent inquiry concluded – that there was no organisation or multi-agency arrangement to take ownership of the risks that had led to the incident in the first place.[20] This is indicative of a broader accountability challenge facing many

European democratic governments; while clarity regarding agency or institutional ownership for crisis response, and of treating specific symptoms of strategic harms is usually well established, where and who is accountable for confronting the roots and prevention of harmful strategies or mitigating enabling environments is at best vague and more often not determined. This structural democratic failing contributes to strategic and system failure in the face of complex threats while also adding to further breakdown of public trust and the perception there is an absence of senior and sincere accountability when big things go wrong. What then, is needed to respond pre-emptively and with impact?

Democratic Defence as a mobilising framework

"We invest in tanks and aircraft over decades because we know security requires long-term capability. We must begin to treat social resilience in the same way."

Øistein Knudsen Jr.
Chief of the Norwegian Civil Defence
Sarajevo Security Conference, 26 September 2025

Across the region, strategic competition increasingly operates through societal and political pressure, not only territorial contestation: the civilian and social realm is now a frontline of European security. Whether military or civilian, there is shared concern that European systems and institutions are not prepared for these forms of contestation. Moreover, the near consensus view is that without political attention, leadership and decision making, the trajectories of both threat and regional inertia will continue.

As the world changes, the way in which governments discharge responsibilities of national and regional security must change with it, and if the new fronts of strategic competition increasingly lie within societies themselves, new impetus must be found to adapt. The threats now facing democratic societies, including those set out in this paper and in more detail by others, operate across blurred boundaries between domestic and foreign policy, below traditional thresholds of war and peace, across the civilian and military realms. However challenging a reality, this means traditional defence and security investments, while remaining essential, are not sufficient to keep us and others safe or to protect what matters. There are implications too not only for the limitations of conventional deterrence but also for the future and nature of partnership, allyship and international strategy within and beyond the spheres of defence.

Social, security and democratic harms are often treated as distinct domains in European governance and civil society. Social impacts are usually understood in relation to quality of life, inequity and cohesion; security in terms of physical safety, terrorism, borders and geopolitical threat; and democracy in terms of trust, rights, standards and the rule of law. This delineation is reflected across European collective and national governance structures, budgets, and strategy, but the changing nature of what can harm us means retaining boundaried interpretations of these distinctions, and the biases this habit has established, is restricting our systems, their wiring, and the political ability to mobilise.

The strategic weaponisation of identity and grievance operates across and between these domains simultaneously and very often deliberately — degrading social cohesion, eroding trust in institutions and democratic legitimacy, and increasing vulnerability to violence, instability and external interference. The scale, speed and interconnected nature of these harms mean they are no longer episodic but systemic and cumulative. Moreover, this trajectory of degradation is gathering pace as the planet overheats, global trends of food and resource insecurity intensifies, economic markets become less stable, conflict and mass atrocity crimes become more common; Europe will face varied and new external shocks that will strain social and

political relations. It is this convergence that places democratic cohesion itself at the centre of contemporary strategic competition.

Europe is a diverse region where these threats are felt unevenly. High-trust societies with strong civic institutions, such as those in parts of the Nordic region, appear to demonstrate greater resilience to disinformation and polarisation. In contrast, contexts where social trust is lower or where political fragmentation is more acute may be more vulnerable to destabilisation. However, it is not quite so clear-cut. Where trust is underpinned by deference to institutions rather than active civic participation, resilience can appear robust but remain brittle. Likewise, societies that are more sceptical and or participate in robust disagreement with the state and institutions will cultivate resilience in a different way. It is where *community resilience*[21] is strong, 'trust, solidarity, and mutual support foster effective crisis responses.'[22] When societies have strengthened connectedness, resource availability at a community level, and cultivated a practice of public participation, 'when trigger events happen in resilient communities, people are able to reject hateful actors seeking to exploit the situation.'[23]

That community and societal resilience must be prioritised amid such instability and varied threat is itself not challenged in principle; rather there is hesitancy and disagreement regarding precisely how and to what extent the priority is pursued.

Ultimately, making Europe and its states safer requires making democratic societies themselves harder targets, but in doing so, recognising what the defence and security expertise of Europe already know; this work belongs in the political, social, and civilian realms. What then could this dimension of Europe's collective defence reset and closer partnership with the UK (and others) look like? How do societies, states and regional institutions protect and strengthen the features that distinguish democratic societies from authoritarian systems – and are therefore precisely what face attack?

What follows is a proposed framework of democratic defence that recognises the social fabric of democratic societies is now a frontline of strategic competition.

Just as states invest over decades in military capability, democratic resilience requires sustained investment in the civic, social and institutional infrastructure that enables democratic societies to function. But military systems, defence programming, and significant elements of conventional security budgets are designed, ringfenced and protected across decades, while civilian resilience infrastructure is often funded year-to-year. Yet both are essential to security and all the more so in a highly contested hybrid world.

Addressing this imbalance requires returning to big questions of strategy, vision and values. This means moving beyond narrow policy "levers", outdated assumptions, reactive responses, and the habits of thinking that lower the ceilings of our ambitions.

Strengthening these foundations will not eliminate threats, but it will significantly reduce the ability of adversaries to exploit social divisions. But we know that

when societies experience fairness, agency, connection and visible care, they are significantly more resilient to shocks, disinformation and identity-based mobilisation. Conversely, where social cohesion collapses, no amount of downstream policing, crisis response or military preparedness can compensate for the loss, damage and costs.

Pillars of Democratic Defence

1. Democratic defence as a mobilising collective mission

As European states seek to reset collective defence and security capabilities and move towards greater self-reliance, democratic defence must be established as a central organising objective of both national and collective strategy — providing a clear point of orientation against which decisions are made, trade-offs are assessed, and progress is measured. This would signal a necessary recognition that safeguarding social democratic assets is fundamental to ensuring societies, states and regions are able to successfully navigate the inevitable uncertainty of the coming years.

While the current pace of shocks and the scale of harms may already feel acute and overwhelming, the trajectory is not temporary. Urgent mobilisation is required to begin reorienting systems now, but this must be matched by long-term investment and strategic planning, recognising that resilience, trust and cohesion are not rapidly generated, but cultivated over time. Honest and difficult conversations need to be had regarding the boundaries of European defence budgets – and what the appropriate balance across civilian and military investment for resilience, preparedness, and defence looks like in an era of hybrid and anti-democratic contestation.

The social components of resilience cannot remain marginal policy concerns but become core elements of national security and regional strategies, embedded across systems and institutions so that strengthening democratic resilience becomes everybody's business in democratic governance, from the regional to the national to the local. This is not an argument for mainstreaming – where so many needed and well-intended social democratic agendas have been integrated into irrelevance – but a political and collective reorientation of expectation, prioritisation, and understanding of what constitutes success.

2. Invest in social cohesion as critical infrastructure

Social cohesion is a cornerstone of contemporary resilience and must be recognised as critical infrastructure for European security. Cohesive communities are better able to withstand shocks, resist attempts to inflame division, and respond effectively in moments of crisis. Already across Europe, community and civil society actors play an essential role in building this resilience: providing inclusive spaces that foster connection and reduce isolation; sustaining local networks that enable rapid, coordinated responses; and acting as trusted intermediaries that counter misinformation, de-escalate tensions and mitigate identity-based harms.

There is therefore both a need and opportunity to embed social cohesion across resilience, preparedness and security systems. Social cohesion and community resilience – and the organisations, communities, and local leaders who undertake this work – should be informing the development of national security, civil preparedness and crisis response frameworks.

This work requires sustained investment and should be resourced through defence and security budgets, reflecting its role as critical infrastructure for resilience. However, it must remain under civilian leadership, ensuring delivery is anchored in the

institutions and actors best equipped to engage communities, sustain participation, and translate policy into durable societal resilience — preserving the integrity of the social and civic domain in which this work must operate.

3. Prioritise adaptive democratic strategy and activity

As adversaries have built capacity, coordination and strategic clarity, many democratic governments have hollowed out their own institutional capabilities to respond. Europe must therefore work with speed and sophistication to mobilise – democratic systems must now adapt not only in what they prioritise, but in how they think and act. The prevailing assumption that values-led policy is a dispensable luxury must be confronted; the fundamentals of social democracy – rights, protections and pluralism – are not in fact in tension with national and regional interests but are essential to securing them.

In the face of the pace and scale of what is coming, governments and regional institutions must rapidly become more agile and find creative approaches to strategic policy development to counter their bureaucratic inertia and information overload. The current imbalance of time spent within systems on analysis and management as a crisis grows, rather than finding solutions and taking decisions, is simply not sustainable. Risk-averse decision-making cultures that constrain the generation of policy options, and depress creativity and morale, have become defining features of European governance – to the extent it has become a vulnerability in its own right.

Recognising that bureaucratic transformation takes time, immediate and dynamic investment is needed to cultivate constellations of agile proponents of social democratic positioning, defence, and leadership, inside and outside of governments. A return to the modest funding needed to drive more ambitious strategic regional political activity is evident. Responsibility here lies with non-state donors as well as with governments; decades of divestment from advocacy and political engagement, and the ‘processification’ of funding in general, has stripped progressive European civil society and social movements of the political agility and confidence needed to create the space for and offer alternatives to government policy. Anti-democratic mobilisiation, meanwhile, has done the opposite. At the same time, community knowledge, leadership and constructive challenge must be recognised as essential rather than secondary inputs - or even irritants - to increasingly closed centres of European power, whether within Europe’s institutions, its states or NGO and thinktank culture. Participation in democratic processes, particularly at the local level, is not simply a normative good, but a functional necessity that in itself strengthens trust, cohesion and the quality of decision-making outcomes.

4. Democratic confidence and narrative

Authoritarian strategies increasingly seek to delegitimise democracy itself by portraying democratic institutions as corrupt, weak or captured. Democratic defence therefore requires more than institutional reform; it requires renewed confidence in democratic values, institutions and their capacity to deliver. This depends on honest and new forms of engagement with publics — acknowledging grievances, rebuilding

trust, and moving beyond the dominant democratic communications style reinvented in the last twentieth century and recognising the cynicism of contemporary speeches-by-numbers alienates increasingly anxious and fractured electorates. To talk honestly about living in uncertainty is not an expensive endeavour but it is a brave one.

At the same time, democratic governments must more clearly articulate and defend a positive vision of democratic society — one grounded in what is under attack, the cost of losing ground, and what is to gain in successful collective defence. There is opportunity as well as need for European states to work together to build this narrative with conviction: What distinguishes democratic systems from authoritarian alternatives is not a vulnerability to be mitigated, but a strategic advantage to be mobilised. Democratic defence therefore rests ultimately on the recognition that the values, relationships and institutions that define democratic life are also what underpin long-term security, stability and resilience.

Conclusion

Across the region, from southeastern vulnerability to Russian influence or Greenlandic alert to the new American expansionism, there is growing consensus that traditional defence and security measures alone are not sufficient for Europe to meet what is coming. Making Europe, its states, societies and institutions harder targets as competition and instability intensifies will require a form of democratic defence that protects and strengthens the assets which distinguish our imperfect societies from authoritarian alternatives. Thus, cohesion, resilience and our national and regional social fabric are essential to national security in an era of anti-democratic resurgence.

The primary argument of this paper is the social democratic assets that sustain open European societies are increasingly treated as sites of strategic competition. The infrastructures of democratic life, safety and stability — institutions, epistemic consensus, people, diversity, values and rights — are deliberately targeted. But it is not only these assets themselves that are under pressure; the strategic activation of identity, difference and grievance has become a central tactic through which they are contested, destabilised and, in some cases, hollowed out from within. Put simply, the civilian realm has become a new kind of frontline of European security.

The social impacts are felt in everyday life as publics feel more polarised, their trust in governments and democratic institutions continue to decrease. As these dynamics intensify, hate crime, gender-based violence, varied identity-based harm including terrorism and transnational repression, and social fracture will only keep rising, becoming simultaneously normalised and more extreme. Minority communities will continue to pay the highest and earliest price. But the harm will not stop there. As anti-pluralist politics consolidate, new groups will become vulnerable, trust in democratic institutions will collapse further, and the social conditions required for stability, growth, and security will disintegrate. At that point, no amount of downstream crisis response or military preparedness will compensate for what will be lost. The space for democratic mobilisation will shrink. When shocks come – whether in the form of civil unrest, attacks on our infrastructure, or in the breakdown of supply chains – if the social fabric is torn, human, financial and economic costs will spiral.

So much of Europe's democratic governance has become characterised by reactive response and a self-deprecating belief that values-led policy is a luxury no longer afforded. What for too long has been seen as rational political orthodoxy – *that democrats are bound by the world as it is not led by the vision of what it should be* – has come to subjugate the fundamentals of social democracy – rights, protections, values – as dispensable. This groupthink is not serving progressive democracies nor the publics they represent. This way of thinking has ultimately left Europe less safe, more fractured, and ill-prepared as it enters a period of profound climate, security, and economic instability.

Meanwhile, our adversaries have invested in strategic execution of the long haul towards a vision of the world *not as it is but as they wish it to be*. As anti-democratic and aggressive statecraft takes evermore brazen aim at what we have taken for granted, commensurate mobilisation must be mounted repair, strengthen and defend what is under attack.

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